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One of Derrida's main topics in the essay *Signature Event Context* involves the nature of writing and its ability to communicate a determinate meaning. Ultimately, the scope of his discussion is expanded to include all forms of language. Derrida asserts that for writing/language to succeed it must be iterable, where iterable means "repeatable in the absolute absence of the receiver or of any empirically determinable collectivity of receivers."[1] In other words, meaning should be able to be communicated whether or not the intended receiver is present.

In Peter Kivy's article, "The Fine Art of Repetition" (found in a book by the same name!), Kivy quotes Eduard Hanslick's treatise *On the Musically Beautiful:* "[Music] is a kind of language which we speak and understand yet cannot translate."[2] By calling music a language, music has entered into the realm of Derrida's discourse.

Two questions present themselves. First, how does internal iterability—'literal' repeats such as the repeat, *da Capo*, and *dal Segno* signs—function in (absolute) music? Does it affect the music/language connection? Also, what about the iterability of a musical score. I am not considering whether the notes—pitch, timbre, and duration—can be reproduced; rather, I am concerned about the iterability of the music—dynamics, tempo, phrasing, articulation, etc. Given music's nonspecific 'alphabet', is even one 'ideal' performance possible? If not, does this prevent the musico-linguistic connection?

I will begin by summarizing Derrida's position on language and iterability.

I

Derrida's general concern involves the ability of language to communicate determinate meaning. In general, words will have several meanings. It is only through determination of context that this set of meanings can be restricted in such a way as to allow one meaning to stand out. However, "context is never absolutely determinable."[3]

Without the capacity to establish context, the transmission of meaning becomes necessarily impossible.

The difficulty inherent in establishing context becomes apparent when one considers the relationship between the essential elements of all communication and the various means of communicating ideas. All forms of communication involve a sender and a receiver. The difference is that these two elements interact in dif-

ferent ways depending upon whether the adopted means of communication is oral or written. Oral communication allows two people to communicate directly. One advantage that speech has over writing involves the clearer transmission of context, and thus meaning, through inflection, tone, and gesture, as well as other forms of (determinate) emphasis which writing lacks. Also, there is a better chance that the sender and the intended receiver will be the only ones participating in the exchange. (The significance of this will be demonstrated shortly.) Due to the combination of these ideas, Derrida indicates that contextual indeterminacy does not pose a significant threat to the success of oral communication.

On the other hand, writing is plagued with features which prevent the reader from establishing a determinate context. First, inherent in written communication is the absence of the sender. Without the sender's presence, the number of contextual clues (such as the various means of emphasizing words that were listed above) is greatly reduced thereby diminishing the chances that meaning will be correctly communicated. Second, written communication can be received by many people either in addition to or instead of the intended receiver; the (intended) receiver may be absent. Here again there will be a reduction in the number of available contextual clues and this reduction will prevent the communication of meaning. Finally, there is the possibility that both the sender and the receiver will be absent. In this case, so much of the requisite contextual information is missing that the reader cannot determine the meaning of the words' interactions. Derrida arrives at his conclusion that "context is never absolutely determinable" based on the effects that each type of absence has on how meaning is communicated.

In *The Post Card* Derrida explores the ramifications of the last case, reading a written document when both the sender and the receiver are absent. If viewed simply as an extended example, reading this treatise causes one to experience the confusion which results when nothing is known about the sender, the receiver, or their relationship. In addition, Derrida exposes the implications of the middle case, where the sender is aware that there may be many unintended receivers of a given communication. Such a situation is inherent in sending postcards since anyone has access to the exposed side. Eventually, it becomes clear that all written communication shares this potential for unintended readers. The realization of this fact leads one lover to wish that his love letters would burst into flames upon being consumed by his partner so that no one else could read them. After all, the written word holds a great degree of power (especially when the reader does not know the exact context in which the words were written?) because the function of written language is to communicate meaning; iterability is built into written language.[4] I return, then, to SEC and iterability.

To understand why iterability is built into language you must understand Derrida's picture of the evolution of language. As indicated above, language began as speech. People wanted speech to both have more permanence and communicate with more people. As a result, they started drawing pictures which

referred to the same object that the sounds referred to. Once writing began, it continuously evolved and was refined so as "to gain or save the most space and time possible by means of the most convenient abbreviation." In other words, "the same content, formerly communicated by gestures and sounds, will henceforth be transmitted by writing, by successively different modes of notation, from pictographic writing to alphabetic writing."[5] In so far as this pictographic writing always referred to the same concept/object, the alphabetic writing was destined to do the same.

The above process insures that written language is iterable; it was the necessary (and intentional) result of written language's earliest forms that it would communicate meaning, with or without the receiver's presence. Derrida expresses this point when he says, "A writing that is not structurally readable—iterable—beyond the death of the addressee would not be writing."[6] For writing to be writing it must function regardless of whether the sender or receiver is present or absent; that is, it must be iterable.[7] (Note that structural iterability does not imply that determinant meaning will result.)

Derrida concludes the "Writing and Telecommunication" section of *Signature Event Context* with two important ideas.

The first of these ideas involves the concept of a sign.

> A written sign, in the current meaning of this word, is a mark that subsists, one which does not exhaust itself in the moment of its inscription and which can give rise to an iteration in the absence and beyond the presence of the empirically determined subject who, in a given context, has emitted or produced it.[8]

This sign is still readable (iterable) even if we do not know when it was first inscribed, even if we do not know the author's conscious intentions when (s)he made it.

This sign then has the potential to be used in many other contexts. That is, the statement can be taken out of its present context and 'grafted' into some new context. Again, "Every sign, linguistic or non-linguistic, spoken or written . . . in a small or large unit, can be cited, put between quotation marks; in so doing it can break with every given context, engendering an infinity of new contexts in a manner which is absolutely illimitable."[9] This, then, introduces a second type of iterability based on the ability to repeat a set phrase in various contexts, even when the origin of the phrase has been forgotten. (This second type of iterability matches what will be described below as internal repetition/iterability in music where 'literal' repeat signs, in any of their guises, are analogous to quotation marks.)

Derrida's essay *Signature Event Context* presents several ideas about the nature of language and iterability which relate to music's iterability (especially as the analysis by Kivy and myself, offered below, will show). All language is iterable.

This iterability, which allows the written language to continue to function even in the radical absence of sender and receiver, is based not on meaning, which, as a result of contextual problems, remains indeterminate, but on structure. Written language is based on the iterability of the sign—physical mark corresponding to spoken communication—which can be cited in numerous different contexts, regardless of whether the original meaning is still known.

We are ready to consider music as language.

II

Before discussing music's iterability, several ideas need to be addressed. First, the relationship between music as language and Derrida's picture of language should be strengthened. Second, the ideas of 'structure' and 'meaning' should be defined as they apply to music.[10]

The best way to demonstrate the similarity between generic language and music as language is to compare the evolution of language (as presented in section one) with how music's language has evolved. The Western musical tradition began as a vocal gesture which was used during the Catholic Mass. The monophonic quality of these masses allowed them to be transmitted orally without any problem. However, changes such as the need for permanence, the need for wider distribution, and the addition of other vocal lines made oral transmission through generations more difficult. To alleviate these problems, monks began devising systems of writing music down. The initial attempts to write the music down were overly simplistic. For example, the first system of notation consisted of a single line above and below which marks were made to indicate the relation between the given note and the starting pitch. In addition to the lack of specific pitches, there was no attempt made to indicate rhythmic value. This system of written notation was (continuously) refined in an attempt to arrive at a more (economically efficient) form. Today's written music—a five line staff which allows the specific relationship between pitches to be noted as well as a sophisticated pictographic system of rhythmic markings—is much more effective. Still, during the last fifty years composers have continued to attempt to modify this so that it more closely resembles the music to be performed.

Clearly, then, the above history of (written) music follows an evolutionary pattern which is similar to Derrida's picture. Furthermore, today's musical notation, which is highly specific, is (necessarily) iterable. As with all languages, a system of signs must be learned, but, once this is accomplished, one can easily recreate the sound of any notated piece of music. We are ready to address the difference between structure and meaning with respect to iterability.

Derrida's account of language in *Signature Event Context* presented us with two types of iterability: syntactical (structurally-based) and semantical (meaning-based). Both forms of iterability exist with respect to music as language. However, I need to clarify what these words mean when they are applied to music.

The concept 'structure', as I will use it, refers to elements such as pitch, duration, and instrumental timbre which are precisely stated by the musical score. In this respect, music is a code that can be recreated even in the absence of sender and receiver. The language of music is such that there can be no question of its syntactical iterability.

On the other hand, 'meaning' refers to the more subtle and subjective elements of music—e.g., dynamics, articulation, phrasing, and tempo (to name only a few)—which cannot be drawn directly from the written score. To determine music's 'meaning' depends on a careful evaluation of the work's context. Contextually relevant events include, but are not limited to, the year when it was written, the event for which it was written, events in the composer's lifetime during which it was written, as well as possible structural and harmonic devices. A semantic iteration of the score attempts to combine all of the above ideas so that the piece's meaning is successfully conveyed to the audience.

Finally, I should clarify what is meant by a successful performance. A successful performance is one in which the composer's intentions are realized. All performances are attempts to achieve this end.[11] It is with respect to music's semantic iterability that the problem of the iterability of a musical score (alluded to above and discussed below) arises.

Before addressing the problem of the score's iterability, I will turn to Kivy's article "The Fine Art of Repetition" and 'literal' internal repetition, or syntactic iterability.

III

In "The Fine Art of Repetition," Peter Kivy addresses a problem that he perceives with "absolute music"—that is, music without explicit connections to literature. This problem involves the function of literal repeats such as those indicated by the "double dots in front of a double bar, or *da capo*, or *dal segno*."[12] Kivy contends that the repeats are significant and, as a result, both aesthetic theories and actual performances of absolute music need to pay more attention to how they function.

Before presenting Kivy's argument, we should keep in mind how these 'literal' repeats relate to Derrida's iterability. Derrida says that all language must be structurally iterable. In other words, one must be able to cite independent syntactical groupings in various different contexts. In section two, the notion of the syntactical iterability as it relates to music was addressed. The 'literal' repeat that Kivy refers to involves taking a phrase—group of pitches and durations—and restating it at another point in the work's progression. There can be little doubt that such literal repeats are examples of music's syntactical iterability.

Kivy presents the reader with three theories with respect to the function of the repeat in the work of music. These theories are the 'literary' theory, the 'organism' theory, and the 'wallpaper' theory. Each of these theories is supposed to both

explain the repeat's function, and bestow music with the high status with which it is usually viewed.

As the name implies, the 'literary' theory talks about music in terms that are explicitly related to literature and linguistic structures. This theory viewed 'absolute music' as a temporally ordered discourse. As most linguistic models will do, music is then given its high place on account of its 'meaning' or 'content.'[13] Kivy observes that "musical repetition makes sense where linguistic repetition does not."[14] As a result, the 'literary theory' fails to explain how (why) the repeat functions in music. Therefore, Kivy dismisses this model's ability to account for music's syntactical iterability.

The second theory that Kivy presents is the 'organism' model. This model is also temporal and orderly. However, it lacks the 'literary' theory's discursive element. Instead, the 'organism' model describes a well organized progression towards a specific end (in symphonic music, this end is a metaphor for life). Although Kivy presents several problems with this account, the criticism most relevant to the current discussion indicates that using 'literal' repeats directly opposes the idea of progress. After all,

> An embryo which followed the plan of a sonata movement, even where neither the exposition nor the development were repeated (which would omit some of the most imposing and well-known examples in the repertoire), when it got to the point in its progress to term analogous to the sonata recapitulation, would have to go right back to conception and start the process all over again.[15]

Since music relies on repeats, 'process' models (which includes both the 'literary' and the 'organism' model) must fail when attempting to explain the repeats function in music.

Where Kivy's other two models have failed, the wallpaper model succeeds in explaining the role of the repeat. This model, which (apparently) trivializes music, comes from §16 of Kant's *Critique of Aesthetic Judgement*. According to this theory, music is purely decorative; it does not have any intrinsic meaning or content.[16] More important in Kivy's estimation is the way that this account explains music's repeats. Wallpaper and Persian carpets are based entirely on repeated patterns. Music, for Kivy, is based on the same ideas but, due to its temporal nature, involves a 'prescribed way of listening' which is inherently more structured (and thus elevates music's status?). Musical repeats, then, "are the composer's way of allowing us, indeed compelling us to linger; to retrace our steps so that we can [grasp] the fleeting sonic pattern."[17] Ultimately, these repeats are an essential part of the composition; a part that should not be left out. After all, repeats do more than help us to grasp the pattern, "they are . . . part of what constitutes musical patterns in the first place"; repetition in music, according to

the wallpaper model, is part of the pattern that is there to help itself be grasped.[18]

How do these theories relate to Derrida and the iterability of (musical) language?

Kivy's rejection of both of the 'process' models seems to go against Derrida's conception of language. This rejection asserts both that iterability hurts spoken language and that music is inherently iterable. However, this only seems to be the case; there is a subtle equivocation involved in the use of 'iterability'.

When talking about iterability's detrimental effect on spoken language Kivy is referring to semantical iterability. This becomes clear when one notices that surrounding sentences focus on content and meaning. He is, then, asserting that meaning in language is not iterable because the phrase's context cannot be literally repeated, and thus the meaning will change. To this extent, Derrida would agree. However, when Kivy says that iterability is a necessary part of music, he is referring to syntactical iterability. This change is confirmed by the fact that the article is concerned with 'literal' repetition. Again, Derrida would agree in so far as he has stated that for writing to be writing the code (syntax) must be repeatable.

The problem, however, is that Kivy overlooks the equivocation. Such an oversight is confirmed when considering the inclusion of a point by Eduard T. Cone within Kivy's article.

Kivy cites the article "Inside the Picture: Problems of Performance" in an attempt to clarify the nature of repeat in music. Cone maintains that there is not "true redundancy" in music because "each statement is influenced by its position, by what precedes and what follows it, so that each is, in important respects, different from all others." Kivy summarizes: "what Cone seems to be saying is that there is no repetition in music: The palpable fact turns out to be a palpable fiction."[19] However, consulting Cone's text allows the context of his statement to be established. He does not assert that there is no syntactical repetition of music. Cone's concern, as the title indicates, is performance, and, as indicated above, questions of performance practice necessarily relate to semantical repetition. Cone is attempting, when saying that "each statement is influenced by its position," to indicate that whenever a phrase has been placed in a new context it should be reinterpreted accordingly (Derrida would agree with this point); in fact, Kivy acknowledges this aim but fails to grasp that he is involved in a different realm than Cone is.[20] Kivy's reading of Cone's article overlooks the distinction between the syntactical and the semantical iterability of (musical) language. This oversight results in Kivy rejecting a point that he himself had just accepted when talking about non-musical language.

Focusing on syntactical iterability allows one to understand how Kivy's conclusion concerning the function of repeats relates to Derrida's linguistic theory. Kivy shows that the function of internal repetition involves helping the listener to hear the pattern of which the repeat is itself a part.[21] This idea centers around the

inherent iterability of music. Saying that "[repeats] are . . . part of what constitutes musical patterns in the first place" is to acknowledge that (musical) language operates by taking a small number of signs which are constantly reused in new ways. That language can communicate anything is based on our ability to grasp patterns. "But, by definition, pattern is that very repetition."[22] In saying this, Kivy is asserting that language is a self-generating pattern, the comprehension of which relies on itself. This idea is very similar to Derrida's concept of iterability as that essential aspect of language which allows us both to generate more language and to understand what has already been generated.

In trying to explore the function of the 'literal' internal repeat, Kivy proposes three models: 'literary', 'organism', and 'wallpaper'. The first two models are rejected because of an apparent contradiction between the iterability of language as opposed to the iterability of music(al language). In the end, this contradiction is based on an equivocal use of the word iterable. Once the equivocation is exposed, we see that (and Kivy unknowingly—unintentionally?—agrees that) language functions according to the model set out by Derrida. Moreover, the potential clash between language and music is avoided when the above equivocation is kept in mind. Ultimately, Kivy's conclusion, that music is necessarily iterable, confirms my musico-linguistic connection and, at the same time, affirms the relationship between language and iterability that Derrida proposed.

It is time to move from music's internal (syntactical) iterability to semantical iterability of a musical score.

IV

In *Signature Event Context*, one of the elements that Derrida describes as preventing language's semantic iterability is absence, either of sender, receiver or both. Without one or both of these people, the context in which the sign was recorded becomes lost and without context meaning remains indeterminate. While losing the context will not, by definition, interfere with the reproduction of the musical sign, significant problems arise when one is attempting to create an 'ideal' performance.

Performing a score necessarily involves the absence of the sender—that is, the composer. That this is case is obvious when one considers the case where Anne Sophie Mutter, a violin virtuoso, performs a piece by Paganini. However, even if Paganini were to perform his own piece the composer would still be absent. Although he performs his own work, it is Paganini qua performer that reproduces it on the violin whereas it was Paganini qua composer that initially recorded the signs. It would seem, then, that with respect to musical language, "context [remains] absolutely undeterminable." (Although the absolute possibility of an ideal performance cannot be excluded, such an event would have to be the result of chance and thus is not relevant to this consideration of the capacity to communicate a determinate meaning via the language of music.) Consequently, the musi-

cal score is not (semantically) iterable; the 'ideal' performance would seem to be eternally elusive. At the end of Cone's article, he makes a similar conclusion:

> And even though the ideal performance may be a chimera, some performances are, after all, better than others. Some are superlative, and some are unacceptable. Although we can never achieve perfection, we must still do the best that we can.[23]

V Conclusion

In *Signature Event Context*, Derrida presents his theory of language. The first section of this essay, "Writing and Telecommunication", indicates that iterability is an inherent feature of all languages. This iterability has two forms: syntactic and semantic. All languages share syntactic iterability which means that they are made up of structures which can be repeated an infinite number of ways. While syntactic iterability is necessary, it impedes semantic iterability. Combining the fact that the same signs can be used in numerous different ways with the fact that there is a necessary absence of at least one of the participants in written correspondence prevents the context of a written message from being determinable. Since words can mean many different things, this lack of context prevents one from being able to determine what a given statement means. Ultimately, Derrida indicates that the fact that language is structurally iterable leads to the fact that it lacks determinate meaning.

As most people would agree, music is a form of language. Not only can one view music as a form of language, but the ideas of syntactic and semantic iterability apply to it as well.

From Peter Kivy's article "The Fine Art of Repetition" one can consider how Derrida's ideas about language apply to music's internal iterability. His conclusion can be interpreted as agreeing with Derrida's; musical language is based on iterable patterns. Furthermore, with respect to Kivy's specific topic, we see that this tendency towards patterns not only makes up the musical language but enables one to understand these patterns.

We are left, then, with the case of whether or not a musical score is semantically iterable (remember that musical semantics refers to subjective elements of a performance). Due to the necessary absence of the sender, the context remains indeterminate. Therefore, it is impossible for there to be an intentionally ideal performance. While a musical score is structurally iterable, it lacks determinant meaning.

There is then, an interesting connection between language, in the general sense, and music. Both forms of language are structurally iterable, and both lack determinant meaning. While one can assert gradations in the quality of the interpretation with a high degree of confidence, we are left unable to know exactly what the

sender meant. Such a conclusion would seem inherently bad. I am not sure that this is the case. I close with Cone's thoughts upon reaching a similar conclusion:

> It is just as well that there can be no such thing as an ideal interpretation. For if there were, we might long ago have ceased listening to Mozart and Beethoven. It is the renewed vitality of each performance that keeps them alive.[24]

Endnotes

1. Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc*, (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988), p. 7.
2. Peter Kivy, *The Fine Art of Repetition: Essays in the Philosophy of Music* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 347; my italics.
3. Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc*, p. 3.
4. Ibid., p. 7.
5. Ibid., p. 4.
6. Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc.*, p. 7; my emphasis (Notice that he says structurally (syntactically) iterable and not semantically iterable.)
7. The combination of this conclusion with the lover's desire that only the intended receiver would receive (read and understand) his letters results in a paradox. What we want is for written language to establish context in a concrete fashion; there should be only one thing that a set of words refers to. However, as soon as this happens language ceases to exist. The phrase would no longer be iterable, but would refer to one object, in a specific place, at a specific time. In other words, a determinate context is diametrically opposed to a functioning language.
8. Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc*, p. 9.
9. Ibid., p. 12 .
10. Throughout this paper, all references to music will be based on the Western tradition, if for no other reason than to facilitate discussions of specific issues.
11. Edward T. Cone, *Musical Form and Musical Performance*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Co. Inc., 1968) p. 38.
12. Peter Kivy, *The Fine Art of Repetition*, p. 328.
13. Ibid., p. 330.
14. Ibid., p. 335.
15. Ibid., p. 338.
16. Ibid., p. 344.
17. Ibid., p. 352.
18. Ibid., p. 353.
19. Ibid., p. 339.
20. Ibid., p. 340.
21. It seems ironic that this conclusion, that repeats are essential to the structure of a work of music, seems to be taken from p. 46 of the Cone article the conclusion of which he has just attempted to refute.
22. Peter Kivy, *The Fine Art of Repetition*, p. 353.
23. Edward T. Cone, *Musical Form and Musical Performance*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., Inc, 1968), p. 38.
24. Ibid., p. 56.